

Skyline UMC

How Are We to Live Together?

A Pastor Explores God's Call to Treat Homosexual Persons as Human Beings

The Rev. Bo Gordy-Stith, Co-Pastor
The Season of Lent, 2010

**Dedicated to my children, Beverly Joy and Eli Cameron,
and to the Saints gathered at Skyline United Methodist Church
who on June 22, 2009 voted to make the following statement of mission:**

We believe that God has called us to reach out to all people
seeking a deeper relationship with God, regardless of age, racial, ethnic or national origin, physical or mental
ability, marital status, religious experience,
affectional orientation, gender identity or socioeconomic status,
welcome them into a community of followers of Jesus who freely choose to worship, serve, and live together
prayerfully and in peace following a Methodist understanding of God's gift of grace, **equip them** to live as the
Holy Spirit gifts and guides, and
send them to serve and reach out to all people in Christ's name.

*Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you
are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord.
Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you;
yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who
abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame.* 1 Peter 3:13-16

Electronic copies of this paper are available online at:
<http://www.skylinechurch.net/pdf/Homosexuality - A Bible Study.pdf> for unlimited distribution.
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Soli Deo Gloria

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How Are We to Live Together?

by the Rev. Patrick Bowman Gordy-Stith, Skyline UMC Co-Pastor – Fourth Revision, March 16, 2010

INTRODUCTION

God has called me to an evangelistic ministry beyond the walls of the church. Having been nurtured all of my life in the church, where my faith in God and love of God and all of God's people continues to grow, I sense as an ordained pastor an obligation to reach out to anyone who does not know God's loving invitation to a kingdom of healing, hope and grace. The Greek word *evangel* means Good News, and this invitation is Good News indeed for anyone who has been shut out of the warmth of God's love and the human community. I have pledged my life to make this invitation to ever-expanding circles of people.

Sadly, this well-meaning calling has gotten me into trouble with religious people who, like me, feel comfortable in the community called the Christian church. Welcoming new people into the church means dealing with persons who are unfamiliar with the Christian faith and who are different in some ways from a typical church person. Evangelism (sharing the Good News) also necessitates a blurring of the line of demarcation between people who are outside the faith and people who are chosen, elect, or whose names are written in the Book of Life. When persons who are new to the faith are welcomed into the Christian community, they bring new questions and force those of us who consider ourselves to be insiders to articulate exactly what it means to be a Christian.

For many, even asking this question leads to spiritual anxiety and discomfort. We reflect (some of us for the first time) on the standards of the community of Christ followers, and begin to question our own qualifications. What we insiders have enjoyed (and have taken for granted) is a sense of God's acceptance and assurance that we will receive a heavenly reward for the sacrifices God calls us to make now. Outsiders always force us to reconsider what it means to be a Christian, not only for them but for us as well.

In some ways, we Christians rely on those outside the faith to help define who we are. We establish a sense of equilibrium – a balance with those who refuse to acknowledge our world view that God is with us in Jesus Christ. New people who join our community always upset the balance, even when they seem to agree with our world view – but especially when they (by their actions, words, or identity) bring a different perspective on God into our household of faith.

For perhaps no group of people is this truer than for persons who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. Long-banished to the margins of human society, they have only recently become a publicly acknowledged part of the church. Their presence forces those of us who enjoy the comfort of the majority to examine issues which for us had been unquestioned. These issues that surface include gender identity and sexual orientation (of heterosexuals), judgment verses acceptance, interpreting scripture and discerning God's will, what repentance means for oneself and for others, God's calling in a person's life, and God's culpability for perceived aberrations in biology and sociology.

Over the past three years, as LGBT persons have gathered to worship Jesus Christ at Skyline, I have witnessed with a heavy heart that many people would rather leave our community than explore the questions raised by the presence of those who we formerly considered beyond the boundaries of the church – if not beyond the scope of God's love.

The dominant understanding of those who feel compelled to leave a church that welcomes LGBT persons is that the matter of rejecting every form of homosexuality as sin and consequently excluding gay people from the church (rather than accepting them) is settled for them. In three years, not one of the two dozen people who have left our church has accepted my invitation to search the scriptures together to explore our understanding of God's will on this issue. The first couple who left acknowledged that they enjoyed what they called my gift for teaching on every other subject, but because my interpretation on homosexuality differed from their own, they refused to listen to me again.

A week after I assured the congregation that I respected opinions about homosexuality that differed from my own, a long-time member e-mailed to tell me he and his family were leaving the church because Skyline was moving in a direction that embraced not only the sinner, but the sin, in his opinion. Then he wrote: "I do not wish to meet with anyone to discuss this subject, nor do I expect anyone to reply to this email."

The conversation ends before it can begin.

One woman left the church after a person in a same-sex relationship preached at Skyline. I asked her if she had heard anything objectionable in the sermon (she did not regularly attend our worship services but had heard a recording of the sermon). She told me that while she thought it was a faithful sermon, the person who preached it was a sinner by definition in her eyes, and this indisputable fact required a faithful church to bar this person from using their gift of preaching for God's glory.

People who have homosexual siblings, children, grandchildren, or other relatives react differently to Skyline's welcome of LGBT persons. Some are relieved that a church exists where their loved ones are not ostracized. But others steadfastly refuse to entertain the possibility of another way of relating to their loved ones (some of whom have died). Typically, they are too embarrassed to acknowledge that they have a relative who is homosexual (except to a pastor), and unwilling to consider that their relative's sexual orientation (or preference, as they understand it) could be anything else but an embarrassment or some sign of divine disapproval or punishment.

We have witnessed people using their hostility toward homosexuality and homosexuals to deflect attention from struggles they are having with sinful behavior. In several cases, a husband who does not attend our church has demanded that his wife and children stop attending Skyline because we welcome LGBT persons in our faith community.

Many well-meaning people at Skyline have equated homosexuality with drug dealing, drug addiction, prostitution, all forms of sexual deviance, violence, and adultery, or any number of sinful behaviors. They weep as they affirm that everyone is welcome here, and question the need to single out any group of people for God's special favor. Yet they see no apparent contradiction in requiring LGBT persons to be content with a second class membership that restricts them from full participation in the life of the church (i.e., no leading, teaching, or preaching).

Finally, some persons acknowledge the need to address what they perceive as an injustice on the part of the church in barring its doors to homosexual persons, but are embarrassed or fearful of the ramifications of publicly naming this injustice. On the one hand, they complain that making our welcome public is too political (an arena in which they believe the church has no business), too "in your face", or that it feels like an invasion of their standards of propriety. Or that it is too costly. For them, financial health trumps theological faithfulness. Money is money, they say, and bills have to be paid.

Yet even on the days when I question my ability to understand God's calling in my ministry, and despair of former friends abandoning me because of my faith, I am heartened by too many stories of thanksgiving told by people who had almost given up on the church (if not God). While some people have left Skyline, God has led so many others to worship a God who embraces homosexual persons as gifted children, even in a community that struggles to understand such a God and such an act of love.

A woman tells how she had loved Jesus all her life, but that she had despaired of ever being able to worship as part of a congregation of people who loved Jesus and who also loved her. One night, she said to us who were gathered with her in worship at Skyline, "I know tonight that I can be a part of the family of God." She and her partner have answered a ministry calling to reach out to many LGBT friends who have given up on the church and also to live out their lives of faith as a witness to church people here who are not used to the idea of a Christian who is homosexual.

We have discovered the bankruptcy of the "hate the sin, love the sinner" stance that many churches take that translates practically into an experience of hate and exclusion for LGBT Christians. We baptized a woman who had been turned away from the church as a child because she wore pants. One man who had long been searching for a faith community couldn't believe when he heard us proclaim that we had been waiting for him – not merely to tolerate him (and his partner) but as members of a living sanctuary, a house not made with hands, where he could be accepted into full partnership and encouraged to grow in his relationship to God.

But stories of LGBT persons celebrating a rare church that respects them as faith partners wouldn't surprise even those of us who dismiss this calling to hospitality as liberal and politically correct. Most of them left because they refused to sit beside a gay person, or they felt our welcome of a gay person automatically excluded them. What they could not imagine is how our refusal to bar the doors to LGBT persons has become a blessing to all of us who call this church our home, regardless of our sexual orientation.

A father speaks of how this calling to live out God's grace and love has resulted in a renewal of his relationship with his children. A mother celebrates that her children can grow up in a church community that

values all persons - so that they can learn to be more just and loving. A father, sibling, or niece of a gay person feels welcomed here because of a sense of wholeness they experience in a faith community where their loved one who has been treated with contempt by Christians would be welcomed by them. A mother testifies to being “captured” by the welcoming spirit for everyone who wants to be a part of this community of faith – especially because that spirit is absent from so many other churches, in her experience.

One man in our church stood with me in a pouring rain (at a baseball game we attended together!) to tell me a story about a transforming encounter he experienced with old friends as a result of our journey toward hospitality for all people. While visiting long-time friends, he mentioned being a part of the Skyline Church process of discernment about whether God would be pleased for us to welcome seekers and followers of Jesus who are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered. His friends leaned forward (across the kitchen table) and asked him directly what he thought of the process.

What to do? The man, who had long been a traditional, conservative believer, felt that God had led him to a place where he wanted to embrace and support LGBT seekers and followers of Christ in their journey. But not knowing on which side of the debate his long-time friends stood, he feared that telling them the truth would threaten his friendship with them. He decided to tell them to truth – that he felt God was calling him (and our church) to welcome LGBT persons as children of God.

His friends began to weep. Then they told him that their son was gay, and that they had feared his sexual orientation would destroy their friendship, as it had so many other relationships in their lives – including their relationship with the church. As we stood in the pouring rain together, the man celebrated the transformation that had enabled him to bear witness to these good friends that God truly loved their son and would not abandon them.

The night we put our Welcome Statement to a vote at Skyline, another man stood up to speak. He and I had spent many hours together individually and in group settings, struggling to know God’s will for our community of faith. Though he disagreed with me regarding scriptural interpretation, he had repeatedly affirmed that he would not leave our community but would struggle together with us – praying, sharing, listening, responding, worshiping, and searching the scriptures. The night we voted together to make public our welcome to LGBT persons – and other persons typically marginalized in the church – this man stood and told us that his struggle and search had ended in a transformation in his own life – so that he truly felt a part of our community of faith as he felt God’s call to welcome others.

Some Christians, of course, dismiss such stories and leave Skyline for a church that affirms what they know about God and themselves – a church where gays are invisible or non-existent. For them the Bible is “clear”, and the matter of welcoming and affirming gay persons is not up for discussion. But for anyone who longs for another expression of the people of the Way of Jesus Christ, who began his ministry by announcing that God had anointed him to bring Good News to the poor and to set free the oppressed – keep reading. When Jesus preached this Good News at the synagogue in Nazareth, they tried to stone him. What follows is the story of how God led me to have faith that the community that calls itself by the name of Christ could find wholeness by refusing to bar the door to anyone.

MY STORY: SOUTHERN BAPTIST PRAYERS AND RED SEA CROSSINGS

Anyone who writes or speaks about homosexuality bears a story about their journey of understanding. What follows is mine.

I grew up in the faith in Green Pines Baptist Church in Knightdale, North Carolina. My mother taught me a love of the Bible and encouraged me to read, meditate on, and memorize much of it. The translation we used was the King James Version. We attended Sunday school, worship on Sunday morning and in the evening, Wednesday supper and fellowship, youth groups, and choir practice.

Preachers, teachers and youth leaders taught me that God loved us all but that our sins separated us from God and demanded a heavy sacrifice. Jesus paid that debt with his life, and if we believed that truth, and asked him to come into our hearts and forgive us, we would be counted among God's saved. Every Sunday the preacher closed the service with an altar call for anyone to come and dedicate or rededicate their life to Christ. We wouldn't leave until someone did.

I had been baptized in Belmont Park Methodist Church (the church of my mother's family) three weeks after I was born. Years later, when I walked down the aisle for the first time at Green Pines, they baptized me again. I walked down that aisle at the close of many other services, feeling the call to rededicate my life to Jesus. I enjoyed my place in the church, but at 18 I longed for more instruction about how to live the Christian life, and not merely how to start it.

After I married Vicki, we attended an Assemblies of God church near our new home in San Diego, California and heard a pastor rail against homosexuals. I couldn't imagine that a homosexual person was in that church, and had never given homosexuality much thought. I assumed that the Bible condemned gay people and their behavior. But as I listened to the pastor, I felt like the sermon used homosexuals as a scapegoat to avoid dealing with their own sins. We looked for another church.

I had known only one gay man growing up, my fifth grade teacher (though I had no idea he was gay while I was his student). Mr. Clay was a tall, flamboyant dresser (this was the mid-70's, and he wore platform shoes and had a huge afro). He taught my classmates and me that we could change the world. He supported us in producing a school play and starting a school newspaper. Half of his class was set aside as a creative learning center. Years after I left Knightdale Elementary, someone shot and killed Mr. Clay because he was gay.

A few Sundays after attending the Assemblies of God church, Vicki and I were drawn to join St. Paul's UMC when the Rev. C.A. McClain called us to live out the call of scripture by inviting our neighbor for a visit in our home. When he told us that he was also going to follow scripture in this way, I was dumbfounded. Here was a tradition that sought to integrate the Bible with daily life, preached by a person who humbly identified himself with the congregation. At St. Paul's, we reclaimed our heritage as a Methodists, and heard God's call to serve as pastors.

When we moved to Rhode Island, we transferred our membership to Calvary UMC and met an Associate Pastor named John Mueller. We had enjoyed a friendship with the Associate Pastor at St. Paul's, a woman named Louise Morley. She challenged my understanding of the Bible by sharing things she learned at Fuller Seminary about Biblical interpretation, which she claimed was more art than science. John Mueller, who was a student at Union Seminary in New York, challenged me as well. Once, we had a conversation about homosexuality in a diner, after which he gently told us that he was "not in the same place we were".

What challenged me more than his liberal stance (which was new to me, coming from a Christian I admired), but that he could be comfortable holding onto a relationship with me while we were standing in "different places."

At Duke Divinity School, I learned that Sunday School had kept me ignorant of a rich 300-year tradition of Biblical scholarship. I mingled with students and professors from different faith understandings. I was forced to defend my understanding of faith, not to others, but to myself. I read with wonder and horror the harsh reality of the failures of the church to be faithful to God throughout history.

David Vryhoff, an older classmate during our Middler year, approached me in the hallway one day and asked me to pray for him. I did not know him then, but I learned that he was in the final stages of ordination in the Episcopal Church and that he was gay. This was 1992 and I was 28 years old. This was the first conversation I had ever had with a gay man about being gay.

David had struggled with his sexual identity for years, and at 50, had embraced a calling to live as a celibate man. The ordination process had not surfaced the subject of his sexual orientation thus far, and he wanted to tell the group overseeing that process the truth about who he was. That revelation might jeopardize his candidacy, and he wanted me to pray for God's will to be done.

As I prayed, I struggled to integrate the new things I had learned about homosexuality through David. I had no category for a Christian homosexual, having been taught that the two identities were mutually exclusive. I didn't turn to rehash the Biblical condemnation of David that weekend because I assumed that it was clear. Yet the fruit of his integrity and his faith in God told me something I had not been taught. Jesus teaches that a good tree cannot produce bad fruit. David's life bore the fruit of Christ. I prayed God would bless him and he was ordained.

A few months later, I was invited to preach to the faculty and students of the Divinity School at a weekly service. The text was the Israelites' crossing of the Red Sea when God made a way for them. As I prepared, I felt God calling me to name our own crossing of the Red Sea in the Church of the 20th Century. I told the story of my encounter with David, and suggested that recognizing the fruit of faithfulness in homosexual persons constituted that new crossing. The Dean called me to his office to warn me that I would be "crucified" if I preached that sermon in a local church.

In my final year at my first church, Bethesda UMC, I joined a prayer group led by a man I had admired in the community of Salisbury, Jim East. He was the general manager of the local Christian radio station, WOLC, and I had enjoyed listening to him pray and teach as I commuted.

One day Jim told me that he was gay.

When Jim came out to me, God called me to make a decision about how I should live out my friendship with him. Up to that moment, I had witnessed in Jim's life profound evidence of the touch of the hand of Jesus Christ. When I learned that he was also gay, I added that description to the others I knew about Jim: gifted, humble, obedient, grace-filled servant of God. And gay.

Our friendship was sealed a few months later, when I called Jim in the middle of the night from the hospital. The doctor was rushing Vicki into emergency surgery to deliver our premature son Eli because Vicki's blood pressure was out of control. I feared they both would die. Jim came immediately to the hospital and prayed with me just before the surgery. I leaned on his faith that God would protect Vicki and Eli. They both survived, and while Eli struggled for life during the next three weeks in the neonatal intensive care unit, Jim gently but firmly encouraged me to risk loving Eli completely, even though I might lose him.

Such has always been Jim's counsel, throughout our friendship. When the truth might hurt, he knows a way to speak that painful truth to me in love, which is perhaps the greatest gift a friend and brother in Christ can give.

Vicki and I asked Jim to be Eli's Godfather. As Jim had prayed Eli into life at his physical birth, he stood beside him at his baptismal rebirth. We were not ashamed of Jim, but honored to be blessed by his life. Ten years later, Eli has come to know Jim as a member of our family, having numerous times enjoyed Jim's company in our home.

One of the painful aspects of my friendship with Jim was how I publicly related to him. In Salisbury, before he was "out" to the community, I was bound to keep my knowledge his sexual orientation in confidence, for his protection. After he came out publicly, though, I struggled with how God was calling me to be faithful to Jim as a friend and as a Methodist pastor. When Jim met David Johns, in a church in Boise, Idaho, and they fell in love, I struggled even more with my self-imposed silence.

The Methodist Church specifically prohibits me from participating in a commitment ceremony between Jim East and David Johns, and enforces that prohibition with a threat to remove my ordination if I violate it. But there is no prohibition against preaching the truth as God leads me to see it, and I felt ashamed that the fear of the "crucifixion" Dean Campbell warned me about prevented me from speaking faithfully and truthfully as a pastor.

On February 5, 2006, God gave me the opportunity to preach with integrity and conviction at Skyline UMC in Wilmington, where I had served with Vicki as co-pastor for nine years. The text was Romans 1:20-31 and the theme was "Homosexuality: Sex, Babies and Shame", part of a series on controversy. After explaining the diversity of Christian understanding of this passage, I told the stories of David Vryhoff and of Jim East. I told the

congregation that I did not interpret the Bible to condemn people for their sexual orientation, and I apologized to them that the church prevented me from offering to them the avenue of faithfulness of lifetime commitment to the one they loved.

Two members left the church. But I was not crucified.

That Fall, two very powerful things happened in my journey of faith. A lesbian couple felt led to join our church, transferring their membership from a neighboring United Methodist church that had limited their ministry involvement because of their sexual orientation. And our family celebrated Jim's and David's wedding in Boise, Idaho.

Jim told me once that he would never ask me to give up my ordination because of our friendship. But he honored me by asking me to be his Best Man. My District Superintendent confirmed that the Methodist *Discipline* did not prevent me from celebrating their commitment as a member of the wedding party. And it was a good thing I checked in advance. Two years after the wedding, a member of our church would make a formal complaint to our Bishop that my expression of friendship in that wedding violated my ordination vows. The Bishop would find that the complaint had no basis in Methodist law.

Jim and David asked a Unitarian Pastor, whom David had met in a graduate program, to perform the ceremony, while their Episcopalian pastor and I watched, having been forbidden by our respective communions from presiding. Jim and David asked Eli to serve as the ring bearer, and Joy stood as a flower girl. Vicki and I sang during the ceremony, packed in a borrowed United Church of Christ sanctuary because St. Michael's Cathedral, the church where Jim and David were faithful members, would make no room for them.

St. Michael's did allow us to hold the reception in the fellowship hall, and their pastor spoke of a time when we would all be allowed unrestricted access to God's house. And then we danced. No member of Jim's or David's families joined them that day, though they had been invited. God invited us to be another kind of family that night, bound together by love and grace so abundant and free that no wall could hold it back. My own family had voiced concern over what our children would be exposed to at the wedding. What they were exposed to was a glimpse of the community of heaven.

I care little for cultural trends. In many ways, I live a counter-cultural life, eschewing all television (and using words like "eschew"), and reading everything I can get my hands on. I prefer a hike around a lake to a stroll in a mall, and don't care if what I wear or own impresses my neighbors. I am aware that the issue of how we are to live together in the church as persons of different sexual orientations is a matter of polarizing debate, and that dominant traditional Christian teaching has condemned homosexuality.

I grew up a conservative white son of the south in the Southern Baptist Church. My culture (of the south and of America) was little different from my religion. I have been privileged above all other human beings on the earth. My father was perhaps the first to challenge this self-understanding, by calling me to empathize and to understand people who were different from me. One of my brothers, Jack, is severely mentally challenged. Growing up in life and in faith alongside Jack forced me to integrate an understanding of God from Jack's perspective as well as from my own.

God has called me to a different place than I have ever known before, through a series of pilgrims and travelers who have taught me a new way of seeing God and life by sharing some of my journey with them. I have searched the scriptures in the course of this journey and found them to be consistent with my conviction that God does not condemn anyone because of their sexual orientation. But that is not how God transformed my thinking (repented me) on the issue of how God calls me to live in a community called the Body of Christ with people whose sexual orientation is different from my own. God accomplished that through living encounters with Jesus Christ in his children, representing a collage of races and national identities, female and male, gay and straight, and a dizzying array of physical abilities and challenges.

God brought me to this place in my journey through people, not debate or doctrine. This, then, is my story: this is my song.

WHAT THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH SAYS ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY

United Methodists number approximately 8 million people in 37,000 congregations in America and about 5,200 in rest of the world. The *Book of Discipline* of the United Methodist Church regulates the activities of the denomination world-wide. It is updated every four years by the *General Conference of Methodist Churches* which is attended by 500 clergy and 500 lay delegates from around the world (the last one was in 2008). The *Book of Discipline* is the only authorized statement of United Methodist belief and practice.

Concerning homosexuality, the United Methodist *Book of Discipline* states that:

“Since the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching, self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be accepted as candidates, ordained as ministers or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church.”

“The United Methodist Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching. We affirm that God's grace is available to all, and we will seek to live together in Christian community.” ¶ 304.3

The church's Social Principles affirm that **homosexual persons have sacred worth**, and although it **forbids its clergy members to marry homosexuals**, the church **affirms the civil rights of homosexuals** and the **“lawful claims typically attendant to contractual relationships” for homosexual couples**.

“Homosexual persons no less than heterosexual persons are individuals of sacred worth. All persons need the ministry and guidance of the church in their struggles for human fulfillment, as well as the spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship that enables reconciling relationships with God, with others, and with self. Although we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching, we affirm that God's grace is available to all. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons.” (From Social Principles, “The Nurturing Community,” Par. 65g)

“We affirm the sanctity of the marriage covenant that is expressed in love, mutual support, personal commitment, and shared fidelity between a man and a woman...Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches.” (From Social Principles, “The Nurturing Community,” Par. 65c).

“Certain basic human rights and civil liberties are due all persons. We are committed to supporting those rights and liberties for homosexual persons. We see a clear issue of simple justice in protecting their rightful claims where they have shared material resources, pensions, guardian relationships, mutual powers of attorney, and other such lawful claims typically attendant to contractual relationships that involve shared contributions, responsibilities, and liabilities, and equal protection before the law. Moreover, we support efforts to stop violence and other forms of coercion against gays and lesbians. We also commit ourselves to social witness against the coercion and marginalization of former homosexuals.” (From Social Principles, “The Nurturing Community,” Par. 66H)

Since 1972, United Methodist delegates to General Conference have voted to include the statement that “the UMC does not condone the practice of homosexuality and considers this practice incompatible with Christian teaching” (paragraph 304.3 above), while also affirming the homosexual persons have sacred worth. In 1992, General Conference delegates confirmed this stance by a 75% majority. Hereafter, I refer to this official stance with the phrase: **incompatibility language**.

In 1988, General Conference delegates voted (by a 70% majority) to prohibit ordination of practicing homosexuals. In 1996, the United Methodist General Conference voted (by a 63% majority) to prohibit our pastors from conducting ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions.

These votes belie a more complex understanding of how God calls United Methodists to live together as people with different sexual orientations and gender identities. In 1988, for instance, the General Conference commissioned a "Committee to Study Homosexuality". Their **majority report that Methodists held divided opinions** about whether or not the practice of homosexuality was inconsistent with Christian teaching was rejected by the 1992 General Conference.

But while delegates voted to retain the incompatibility language by a 75% majority in 1988, a General Council on Ministries (GCOM) study titled "An Analysis of Major Issues Addressed by the 1988 General Conference and a Comparison with Beliefs and Attitudes of Local Church Members" reported that only 50% of Methodists surveyed agreed with the statement that "homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.

United Methodist Bishops were also divided in their understanding of God's leading regarding homosexual persons. In 1996, the year that General Conference delegates voted to prohibit our pastors from conducting ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions, 15 (of 50) United Methodist Bishops issued a statement expressing pain over the UMC's stance on homosexuality.

In 2000, the General Conference delegates considered and rejected language that would have officially acknowledged this division in the discernment process. The alternate wording: "Many consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching. Others believe it acceptable when practiced in a context of human covenantal faithfulness" was rejected 585-376 (61%).

That same General Conference, while delegates affirmed the incompatibility language 628-337 (65%), and upheld the prohibition against conducting homosexual unions by 69% (compared to 63% in 1996), they soundly rejected (by a margin of 705-210 or 77%) requiring all United Methodist pastors to take the following loyalty oath: "I do not believe that homosexuality is God's perfect will for any person. I will not practice it. I will not promote it. I will not allow its promotion to be encouraged under my authority".

Perhaps this rejection of a loyalty oath had an effect on General Conference delegates. Every General Conference since has upheld the incompatibility language by a steadily decreasing margin. In fact, in the last three General Conferences, the ballots for the incompatibility language trend toward a potential reversal of this official stance in 2012 (67% in 2000, 60% in 2004, and 55% in 2008).

The United Methodist Church makes a distinction between the *practice* of homosexuality, which is "incompatible with Christian teaching" and the *state of being* a homosexual person, which the church affirms does not negate the sacred worth of a person.

These statements imply that the United Methodist Church welcomes a homosexual person who remains celibate for life into full participation in the life of the church, including ordination. Other than the marriage prohibition, what it means for non-celibate homosexual persons is not as clearly defined.

In 2005, the Rev. Ed Johnson refused to transfer the membership of a gay man from a Baptist church to South Hill UMC in Virginia. The man had been active in South Hill UMC, but because he was living in a committed relationship with another man, The Rev. Johnson denied him membership in the church. Charlene Kammerer, Johnson's Bishop, ordered Johnson to receive the gay man into membership when the matter was brought to her attention by Johnson's Associate Pastor. When Johnson refused to accept the gay man into membership, Bishop Kammerer put him on unpaid administrative leave.

In October, 2005, the Judicial Council of the United Methodist Church reversed the Bishop's censure and reinstated the Rev. Johnson. The Judicial Council affirmed (by a 5-3 vote in Decision 1032) that our Book of *Discipline* "invests discretion in the pastor-in-charge to make determination of a person's readiness to affirm the vows of membership." This means United Methodist pastors alone determine whether or not homosexual persons can be baptized into membership.

The Council of Bishops has no authority over the Judicial Council, but issued an official letter in November 2005 rejecting Judicial Council Decision 1032 and calling "all United Methodist pastors and laity to make every congregation a community of hospitality." Though Pastor Johnson was reinstated as head pastor of South Hill UMC, Bishop Kammerer appointed the Rev. Barry Burkholder to that church in the summer of 2006. In March 2007, Pastor Burkholder and the South Hill UMC congregation welcomed the gay man into full membership.

In the wake of this controversy over homosexuality and membership, the 2008 General Conference voted to change Paragraph 4, Article IV of the Constitution to read simply “All persons shall be eligible to attend [the UMC’s] worship services, participate in its programs, receive the sacraments, and upon Baptism, be admitted as baptized members.” The current language reads: “All persons *without regard to race, color, national origin, status, or economic condition...*”. Ironically, by removing the list that refines (or confines) that word “all” to five specific categories of persons, this amendment seeks to call pastors and laity to live out their ministry in a church that erects no barriers to anyone, especially to persons who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. In the summer of 2009, 39 UMC Annual Conferences across the globe voted against ratification of this change.

Many conservative United Methodists threaten to leave the church if the General Conference votes to soften its condemnation of homosexual persons (and many currently withhold their apportionment dollars and support alternative missions organizations as a down payment on this threat). Our system of electing delegates to General Conference keeps younger United Methodists from taking part in this deliberative process, and many United Methodists who believe God is calling our “connexion” to welcome LGBT persons as full members (who can be married and ordained) are finding ways to remain in the United Methodist Church and be faithful to God.

A United Methodist congregation in New York states in its weekly worship bulletin: “Until all can be married, no one can be married.” In 2007, Pastor Dean Snyder and the congregation at Foundry UMC in Washington DC express their “loyal opposition” by creating a “Service to Recognize and Honor Lesbian and Gay Committed Relationships” of (they are forbidden to consecrate or to bless such marriages according to the Discipline, Para. 341.6). In March, 2010, hours after the District of Columbia passed a new law permitting homosexual marriage, Pastor Mary Kay Totty and the Council of Dumbarton UMC in Georgetown announced its intention to defy the General Conference stricture and “honor and celebrate the wedding of any couple, licensed in the District of Columbia, who seek to commit their lives to one another in marriage”. In 1990, Bishop Joseph H. Yeakel intervened to stop a homosexual wedding scheduled at Dumbarton, a Reconciling Ministries Network member congregation since 1987.

In spite of these moves to express opposition within the Discipline of the United Methodist Church, the denomination continues to officially prohibit its pastors, active and retired, from celebrating homosexual unions or from entering into one.

MY INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURES RELATING TO HOMOSEXUALITY

A woman at Skyline speaks for many conservative Christians when she tells me after church that what concerns her about my decision to welcome and affirm gay persons in the church marks what she perceives as an abandonment of scriptural authority and morality. We are trying to respect each other in our disagreement, yet she assumes that her view of scripture aligns with God and that in order for me to disagree with her understanding that the Bible (and thus God) condemns homosexuality, I have to abandon scripture itself as a means of understanding God's will. For this woman, and for so many Christians like her, the Bible is "clear" in its condemnation of homosexuals, and their interpretation is beyond question or debate. For her and for many conservative Christians, the principle of inerrancy and authority of scripture is a code phrase that really means: the way they interpret the Bible.

Even people who agree that Christians should treat homosexuals with love and acceptance treat the Biblical condemnation of gays as a given. They argue that homosexuality (a sin, obviously, to them) should not be singled out any more than other sins – and since we are all sinners, who can judge another? In response to this argument, conservative Christians have every right to ask, "Does scriptural authority have any bearing on your life?"

I acknowledge that the tradition of the church teaching on homosexuality is dominated by an understanding that homosexuality is a sin. Any interpretation of the Bible that attempts to find another meaning must acknowledge that tradition of interpretation. Yet no tradition of interpretation can faithfully claim to be beyond scrutiny, and traditional understandings of the Bible do change, as both Hebrew and Christian scriptures attest. The Christian break with Judaism is itself a radical reinterpretation of the messianic prophetic tradition, as was so much of Jesus' teaching and preaching (you have heard it said, but I say to you...).

When Jesus debated with the scribes and Pharisees, who had devoted themselves to the study and interpretation of God's word in the scriptures, Jesus suggested that they had not actually read the scriptures on which he based his reinterpretation of Sabbath laws (see Matthew 12:3-5, for instance). Jesus knew and lived out the teachings of scripture (what Christians call the Old Testament), yet his reinterpretation of Hebrew Law and the Prophets was so radical that his followers were excommunicated from the synagogues (see John 9).

Though I have not been excommunicated from the church, I have been forced to defend my pastoral conviction to minister to homosexual persons as individuals of sacred worth before my Bishop (who affirmed my ministry to LGBT persons). At issue is the 30-year official Methodist Disciplinary statement that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching (presumably based on the Bible) and whether the Discipline of the United Methodist Church allows me to live out an interpretation of Christian teaching that challenges this traditional understanding.

Where to begin?

Jesus, who teaches about so many aspects of life and community, never mentions homosexuality, apparently, and only rarely refers to celibacy and marriage. Paul, who wrote over half of the Christian scriptures, apparently condemns same-gender sex in at least one of his letters, and perhaps two others. The Hebrew Bible includes the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (which many people assume God destroyed because the men of the city wanted to have sex with the (male?) angelic visitors) as well as two parallel condemnations of same gender (male) sex in Leviticus, calling the act an abomination (or detestable) and proscribing the death penalty. In addition, there are a number of passages in the Hebrew Scriptures that refer negatively to what some scholars believe is homosexual prostitution (that takes place in the Temple).

Those who call themselves traditionalists (as opposed to someone like me, whom my debate partners like to label a revisionist) also like to point out that there seem to be no positive references to same-gender loving relationships (certainly not marriage) anywhere in the Bible, and both Genesis and Jesus hold that marriage (between a male and a female) is foundational to the divine order of creation.

Taken together, this collection of prohibitions and lack of any positive recognition of committed, loving homosexual relationships forms what some homosexuals call the "Clobber Passages" that many Christians use to justify their condemnation of the practice of homosexuality. An immediate problem arises when reassessing these passages because **scripture has nothing to say about homosexuality as a sexual orientation** – there

is no Hebrew or Greek word that can be translated: “homosexuality”. Therefore gathering a collection of relevant passages is itself a matter of interpretation.

That statement bears repeating: **scripture has nothing to say about homosexuality as a sexual orientation.** The Hebrew and Christian Scriptures do condemn in several instances sexual intercourse involving two men, typically in the context of prostitution in the Jewish Temple or in pagan worship rituals. Some Christians believe that these cultic and ritual condemnations have nothing to do with men (or women) whose same-sex attraction is as much a part of their identity as opposite-sex attraction is for heterosexual human beings.

The two key passages in this debate over faithfulness in sexual expression are Leviticus 18:22 (“You shall not lie with a male as one lies with a female; it is an abomination.” New American Standard translation – hereafter NAS), and Romans 1:27 (“and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error” NAS).

The Leviticus passage uses a word “*toyevah* – abomination” to condemn sexual intercourse between two men that indicates it is a cultic and religious violation, and pairs this condemnation with one against sacrificing one’s children to the foreign god Molech. In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul links same-sex intercourse with worship of pagan idols (literally “an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures” Rom 1:23 NAS).

Deuteronomy 23:17-18 is the first of several Hebrew Scripture passages that condemn same-sex intercourse between two males specifically in the context of ritual/religious prostitution. The verses read: “None of the daughters of Israel shall be a cult prostitute, nor shall any of the sons of Israel be a cult prostitute [Hebrew: *qadesh*]. You shall not bring the hire of a harlot or the wages of a dog into the house of the LORD your God for any votive offering, for both of these are an abomination to the LORD your God” (NAS). The other passages which condemn male temple prostitution include: 1 Kings 14:24 (links *toyevah* and *qadesh*), 1 Kings 15:12 (links *qadesh* with idol worship), 1 Kings 22:46, and 2 Kings 23:7 (indicates that this prostitution was taking place in the Temple in Jerusalem, along with worship of the pagan deity Asherah). Job 36:13-14 also links (male) cult prostitutes to the “godless in heart”.

Note how both the Deuteronomy and 1 Kings 14:24 passages use the same word as Leviticus 18:22 (*toyevah*/abomination) to condemn the act as a violation of cultic religious practice. This consistency **begs the question about where these male same-sex sexual encounters were occurring.** In every case, they were taking place in a religious shrine, as part of a religious (Jewish or pagan) ritual.

How did we make the leap from scriptural prohibitions of a limited cultic/religious practice to a blanket prohibition of all homosexual sexual intercourse (most likely what the United Methodist church means by the phrase: “the *practice* of homosexuality,” although the *Discipline* does not define this phrase)? Part of the answer lies not in scripture itself, but in the interpretive license taken by the translators of scripture. The Hebrew word *qadesh* (male temple prostitute) is a difficult one to translate or even to understand. But the translators of the King James Version in 1611 came up with one that has since linked this ancient cultic taboo to another powerful Biblical story of the attempted gang rape of angelic visitors at Sodom and Gomorrah. The word they used was sodomy.

Sodom and Sodomy: How We Got from There to Here

Genesis 19 (paralleled in many ways in Judges 19 – listed in Appendix 2 below) tells the story of God’s angels destroying the city of Sodom (prefaced in Genesis 13-14 and 18:16-33). Because of this story, sodomy has come to mean anal intercourse, (see the Table on Pages 15-16 below) even though what Genesis reports does not match this cultural assumption. Beyond the Book of Genesis, there are at least 20 references to Sodom and Gomorrah in the Old and New Testaments (see Appendix 3 below). Two of these provide explicit scriptural interpretation of the sins for which God destroyed the towns. The first is Ezekiel 16:49 (NAS): “Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had arrogance, abundant food, and careless ease, but she did not help the poor and needy.” The second is Jude 1:7 (NAS): “Just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities

around them, since they in the same way as these indulged in gross immorality and went after strange flesh, are exhibited as an example, in undergoing the punishment of eternal fire.

The Jude passage reads like a mystical trance or science fiction literature, filled as it is with “angels who did not keep their own domain, but abandoned their proper abode” and men who “by dreaming, defile the flesh, and reject authority, and revile angelic majesties.” The “strange flesh” reference makes sense when you consider that the men of Sodom wanted (perhaps) to gang rape two angels (see Genesis 19:1). There is another precedent, in Genesis 6:4, for this kind of human-angelic coupling. The Jewish Publication Society translation reads: “It was then, and later too, that the Nephilim [giants] appeared on earth – when the divine beings cohabited with the daughters of men, who bore them offspring. They were the heroes of old, the men of renown.” Getting from angelic gang rape to a blanket condemnation of all homosexual relationships is more than a stretch – the Jude interpretation does not support it – and the prophet Ezekiel does not mention sex or homosexuality at all.

Take a closer look at Ezekiel 16 and you begin to wonder why virtually every commentator on Sodom and Gomorrah ignores this explicit statement of the sins of Sodom. And Ezekiel is speaking or writing as God’s mouthpiece (see vs. 36: “Thus says the LORD God...”). Look again at the list God apparently put together: pride, indulgence, laziness, and refusal to help the poor (stranger?). Why doesn’t the word Sodomy mean these offenses, for which God explains through the prophet the city suffered the ultimate punishment?

Why indeed? Did Ezekiel (or God) not get the memo? I suppose it goes without saying that (from a heterosexual perspective) it’s far more comfortable to make scapegoats out of homosexual persons than to accept responsibility for and repent of our own pride, gluttony, laziness, and rape of the poor (ouch!). A good offense is the best defense.

Jesus Christ implies that the sin of Sodom involved refusing hospitality to the stranger, or at least the itinerant (traveling) healer/missionaries he was sending out in Matthew 10:14-15 (“And whoever does not receive you, nor heed your words, as you go out of that house or that city, shake off the dust of your feet. Truly I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment, than for that city” NAS) and its parallel in Mark 6:11 (“...any place that does not receive you or listen to you, as you go out from there, shake off the dust from the soles of your feet for a testimony against them” NAS). This interpretation is supported in the related story in Judges 19 (especially verses 15-19).

Take a look at the outline below of parallels between Genesis 19 and Judges 19 (Appendix 2). To read through them is to enter into a different kind of morality, where hospitality to strangers trumps all other concerns (particularly concern for your daughter’s safety and honor). Look again at the rationale each host uses for refusing to give up the stranger(s) to the mob: “they have come under the shelter of my roof” (Genesis 19:8); “this man has come into my house” (Judges 19:23). Conservatives may reject interpretive efforts to take Jesus Christ seriously as “politically correct”, but the Middle Eastern Code of Hospitality was and is real, even if not in Europe or America. Think of the Afghan villagers recently who refused to surrender to the Taliban soldiers several wounded American (alien) special forces commandoes they had taken under their roof, even though the Taliban fighters threatened to destroy their village (the Taliban fighters respected the Code and spared the village).

How we got from God’s condemnation of pride, gluttony, prosperity, and stinginess (according to Ezekiel 16:49) and inhospitality (Matthew 10:14-15) to creating a new English word for anal sex points to a powerful cultural fear at work in this traditional Christian teaching. True Biblical “literalists” would define “sodomy” as selfishness or inhospitality. That it means something else reveals the ways our cultural context colors (and blinds) our interpretation of the Bible. As on the Road to Emmaus on Resurrection Sunday, consulting the Law and the Prophets around a Table where strangers are welcome to share a meal are the keys to opening our blind eyes.

What *Toyevah* Tells Us

By far, the buttress of the traditional interpretation that the Bible condemns homosexuality is found in Leviticus 18:22 “You shall not lie with a male as one lies with a female; it is an abomination” (NAS) and Leviticus 20:13 “If *there is* a man who lies with a male as those who lie with a woman, both of them have committed a detestable (Hebrew: *toyevah*) act; they shall surely be put to death. Their bloodguiltiness is upon them” (NAS).

The modern Jewish Publication Society translation of the Hebrew Bible, the Tanakh, uses the word “abhorrence” to translate *toyevah*. Words are important. Conservative Christians change these adjectives describing an action in a specific context to a noun they use to name all human beings who have a same-gender attraction: they call them an abomination. And because they find this word in English translations of scripture, they claim divine sanction to treat other human beings so cruelly.

Abomination. Abhorrence. Detestable. *Toyevah*. And the Greek word that Jesus would have known, from the Septuagint, *bdelugma* (more on this word later).

Our scriptures contain so much wisdom. They are the gathered collection of writings of hundreds of generations of seekers after God. They have persisted over six millennia in various forms of transmission because they preserve human wisdom about divine revelation. Yet they can be enigmatic and archaic to a modern believer. One of the things I treasure most about the Christian scriptures is that they contain a treasure trove of interpretive material and commentary on themselves (as in the Ezekiel 16:49 passage above).

The Hebrew word, *toyevah*, occurs in some form 118 times in 112 verses of the Hebrew Bible. One third of these uses (43) are in the prophetic book of Ezekiel, and another third are in the books of Proverbs (22) and Deuteronomy (17). Leviticus heads a group of ten books that use the word less than six times. An examination of how these scriptures use the word reveals a great deal about its meaning for ancient people and for us.

The first three uses of the word (Genesis 43:32, 46:34, and Exodus 8:26) describe the following things about the Israelites that were *toyevah* to the Egyptians: eating a meal, tending livestock, and sacrificing to their God, El. The collection of the six uses of *toyevah* in Leviticus are all related to same-gender sex between males, but four of them link this practice with the “customs that were practiced before you came,” customs that Leviticus claims defile the people who practice them and their land from which the Israelites forcibly displacing them.

In both cases (Genesis/Exodus and Leviticus), *toyevah* demarks a clash between cultural practices that define a people, the land in which they live and the god they acknowledge in worship. The final book of the Torah, Deuteronomy, employs the word *toyevah* to define this clash in a strictly religious sense. In 7:25-26, Deuteronomy labels the worship of idols and even the gold and silver from which they are made as *toyevah*. Idol worship (and other forms of pagan worship) is in fact the chief practice this book condemns as *toyevah* (see 12:31, 13:12-14, 17:2-4, 18:10-12, 20:18, 23:18, 27:15, and 32:16).

You may not want to make the time to carefully read the many passages in the Hebrew Scriptures that use the word *toyevah*. But I certainly have (I have also provided them for you to read in an appendix to this paper). What I have discovered is that whatever *toyevah* might mean, it certainly does not mean “gross” or “disgusting”. That Leviticus employs the word only in chapter 18 and once in 20:13 in relation to the cultural practice of men having sexual intercourse with other men links this practice both to same gender male cultic prostitution (in Deuteronomy 23:18 and 1 Kings 14:24, for instance) and the worship of pagan idols (including child sacrifice), found in Jeremiah 32:35 and nearly all of the 43 uses of *toyevah* in Ezekiel (i.e., 6:9 and 44:7).

You don’t need to have any special knowledge of Hebrew to understand that Leviticus prohibits sexual intercourse between two males as a cultic (ritual) practice. How else could it be linked together with the practice of sacrificing children to the pagan god Molech (Leviticus 18:21 and 20:2-5)? All that is necessary is a sufficient amount of curiosity – asking yourself: “What exactly was happening in ancient Israel when two men would lie with each other as either one of them would lie with a woman?”

The traditional Christian interpretation has been to automatically assume a blanket prohibition in Leviticus against all forms of sexual contact between two males, an assumption which is as unsupported by the whole of scripture as it is an anachronistic reading of our cultural taboos into that of ancient Israel. What the textual evidence seems to confirm, however, is that instead of a homosexual encounter, what Leviticus condemns as *toyevah* may in fact be a specific ritualistic sexual encounter between a (probably heterosexual) Israelite male and a male temple prostitute described (and also condemned as *toyevah*) in Deuteronomy 23:17-18 and 1 Kings 14:24.

Barking Up the Wrong Tree – and Giving Away the Farm

I have read – and remain unconvinced by – the argument that (1) because *toyevah* is a word denoting a cultic violation, and (2) because most Jewish cultic laws are non-binding on Christians, then (3) it follows that whatever the two men were doing in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 must be okay for a non-Jewish person today (since it's only *toyevah*). Certainly there is a connection between *toyevah* and *sheqets*, a Hebrew word found frequently in Leviticus 11, which the JPS translation Tanakh translates as “abomination”. The pre-Christian Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint (with which Jesus and Paul were familiar) uses the same word, *bdelugma*, to translate both *toyevah* and *sheqets*.

Leviticus 11 labels a number of seemingly innocent activities as *sheqets*, including eating shellfish, and specific kinds of birds and insects. Leviticus 11 also calls these dietary practices *tamah* (unclean) as opposed to restricted dietary practices that it calls *tahor* (clean). This word pairing is linked to yet another, in Leviticus 10:10, *qodesh* (holy) and *khole* (unholy), that literally open up a world of meaning in this ancient book of law from the Torah, a huge collection of over 600 ritualistic prohibitions called the Holiness Code.

These prohibitions include (to a contemporary perspective) quirky dietary restrictions (no pork) and cultural practices (no mixing of seeds or fabrics), as well as a host of ancient hygienic restrictions involving skin diseases, household molds, the handling of human and animal corpses, and cultic restrictions surrounding women's menstrual cycles and men's ejaculation. Because most of them have been non-binding on Christians since the Jerusalem Council recorded in Acts 15, the argument that none of them should apply to Christians might seem to be a logical conclusion.

Two problems attend this argument, however, besides the issues that surround any strategy of categorical rejection of scriptural authority for a person of faith. The first involves the observation that we continue to observe several of these prohibitions, not only in the Christian faith, but also in contemporary culture, regardless of our faith. These include prohibitions against incest and adultery, sexual intimacy with animals – and for many in our culture – a cultural taboo against same-gender sexual intimacy in any context. And many of these are found in the 18th and 20th chapters of Leviticus. The second involves Paul's condemnation of the Levitical prohibition against two males having sexual passion and intercourse with each other in Romans 1:27. Christians may be able to ignore much of the Jewish Holiness Code, so the counter-argument goes, but what about the letters of Paul which comprise over half of the Christian Scriptures?

Keeping Kosher with Paul the Pharisee: What's in a List?

Homosexual Christians call Romans 1 and Leviticus 18 the “clobber passages”. Taken together, they're analogous to a one-two punch that supposedly knocks out any attempt to pass off the Leviticus passage as an old covenant anachronism. Before turning to Romans, it might be instructive to spend a few moments with two lesser-known lists of sins which proponents of a Christian understanding of homosexuality as sinful use to support their interpretation of scripture: 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:10.

1 Corinthians 6:9-10 (NASB) discourages the following list of behaviors: “⁹ Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, ¹⁰ nor thieves, nor *the* covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God.”

The Greek for “effeminate” above is *malakos*, which means literally: soft (an adjective to describe cloth). The Greek word some modern translators equate to “homosexuals” in this passage is *arsenokoitēs*. The King James translators used “abusers of themselves with mankind”. It comes from two Greek words: *arrhen* (meaning “male”) and *koite* (meaning: “bed, couch, and cohabitation or conception by extension”).

Here's a sampling of how English translators have struggled with the rendering of these Greek terms into English:

Year	Translation	<i>malakos</i>	<i>arsenokoitēs</i>
1599	Geneva	wantons	buggerers
1611	King James	effeminate	abusers of themselves with mankind
1884	Darby	those who make women of themselves	those who abuse themselves with men
1952	RSV	adulterers	sexual perverts

Year	Translation	<i>malakos</i>	<i>arsenokoitēs</i>
	NJB	self-indulgent	sodomites
1984	NIV	male prostitutes	homosexual offenders
1989	NRSV	male prostitutes	sodomites
1996	TNIV	male prostitutes	practicing homosexuals

Over the years, Christians have interpreted these words as referring to people of lacking a high moral standing, or to masturbators, or to men who sexually abuse boys, or to boys who are the victims of sexual abuse. The NIV translates *malakos* as “male prostitutes”, and *arsenokoitēs* as “homosexual offenders”. The various English translations reveal that we don’t know exactly what Paul had in mind, but what seems clear is that the words are used in relation to each other, probably (as in the NIV translation) the pair of words refers to a male prostitute and the man who has sex with him.

Notice, though, what happens in the *Today’s New International Version* translation, where *arsenokoitēs* (in both 1 Cor. 6:9 and 1 Tim. 1:10) becomes “practicing homosexual”, an anachronistic gloss that uses a phrase lifted directly from our current cultural debate. Making this leap from a condemnation of a same-sex encounter between an older man and a boy prostitute (both of whom were most likely heterosexual males!) to a sweeping Biblical condemnation of all homosexual persons is like saying Paul means to condemn all forms of sex when he includes fornicators at the head of the list, or that he means to condemn all forms of worship when he condemns idolaters next.

1 Timothy 1:10 continues a list, started in verse 9, that includes the Greek word *arsenokoitēs* (note that in this list, it is not paired with the word *malakos*). KJV translators repeat the phrase “them that defile themselves with mankind,” but most modern translators (NAS, NJB) use “homosexuals” or even “sodomites” (RSV, NRSV) here. The NIV uses “perverts” to translate this word. This translation probably comes closest to Paul’s meaning. But notice how the confluence of “homosexual”, “pervert”, and “practicing homosexual” in translating a Greek word attempts to make a case against all homosexual persons. All translation is interpretation, but this example goes beyond what the text of the Bible will support.

By *malakos* and *arsenokoitēs*, Paul seems to have in mind perverse sexual practice in an encounter between an older man and a younger boy prostitute (both of whom could have been heterosexual males). Sound familiar? It sounds like a repeat of the collection of references we have considered in the Hebrew Bible – the only Scriptures Paul would have known when he wrote these letters. And notice how fornication and idolatry head the list in 1 Corinthians. For the writers of Leviticus and the scrolls of the Kings, the link between the selling of sex and the worship of idols and the pagan gods they represented was what made this sexual encounter especially repugnant – especially sinful.

Context is everything. Take another look at those lists. There are 16 lists of sinful behavior in the New Testament (Matthew 15:19; Mark 7:21; Acts 15:20; Romans 1:29-31; Romans 13:13-14; 1 Corinthians 5:9-11 and 6:9; 2 Corinthians 12:20-21; Galatians 5:19-21; Ephesians 4:31; Ephesians 5:3; Colossians 3:5-9; 1 Timothy 1:9; 2 Timothy 3:2; Revelation 21:8 and 22:15). Taken together, they mention 75 sinful behaviors, half of which are only mentioned once, and only 18 of which are mentioned more than twice. What are the two sins that top the list? The first one, fornication (Greek: *pornois*), is mentioned in 13 of the 16 lists. And in second place: idolatry (Greek: *idololatrais*), which is found in half of the lists, including 1 Corinthians 6:9.

When New Testament writers paused to rattle off a list of sins to avoid, they came up with a host of sinful behaviors. But two sins especially were forefront in their minds: fornication and idolatry. Perhaps this is why Paul called the human body a temple of the Holy Spirit, and had this to say about all forms of prostitution (a few verses after the list in 1 Corinthians 6:9):

¹⁵ Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! ¹⁶ Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, “The two will become one flesh.” ¹⁷ But whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit. ¹⁸ Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins people commit are outside their bodies, but those who sin sexually sin against their own bodies. ¹⁹ Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; ²⁰ you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies. (1Corinthians 6:15-20 TNIV)

There is a pattern here that has little or nothing to do with what we have come to understand as sexual or affectional orientation. At issue is whether this collection of verses in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures constitutes a religious justification for Christians to condemn homosexual persons as sinners in the sight of God – not because of anything they do, but because of who they are. This pattern involves leaping from a

specific context in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures – that of prostitution involving two males which takes place as part of a worship ceremony – to the conclusion that all expressions of love and affection between homosexuals must be similarly condemned by scripture, and thus by God.

The opening chapter of Paul’s letter to the Church in Rome serves as a catapult to facilitate this leap, apparently. We turn to it now as the final chapter of this survey of the scriptures traditionally used by followers of Jesus Christ used to justify their condemnation of all homosexual persons.

Romans 1: What is going on Here?

After the opening pleasantries in his letter to the Roman Church, Paul launches into a tirade against “those who by their wickedness suppress the truth” (Romans 1:18). He cites their worship of idols as proof of their foolishness (Romans 1:22-23). Then Paul argues that “God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (Romans 1:24-25).

Because they worshipped the creature rather than the Creator, according to Paul, God “*handed them over*” (the Greek word has the sense of a judge turning over someone for punishment) to impurity, degrading passions, and mental depravity. Here’s how the argument begins:

²⁶ Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. ²⁷ In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error. (Romans 1:26-27, TNIV)

Then follows a list of things to which God hands idolaters over:

- | | | | |
|-----------|------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. greed | 5. deceit | 9. hatred of God | 13. untrustworthiness |
| 2. envy | 6. malice | 10. insolence | 14. hatred |
| 3. murder | 7. gossip | 11. boasting | 15. mercilessness |
| 4. strife | 8. slander | 12. disobedience | |

Then, in Romans 2:1, Paul writes: “Therefore you have no excuse, everyone of you who passes judgment, for in that which you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things.”

In the past, I have joined other interpreters of scripture in noting the irony of singling out anyone on this all-inclusive list of human sinfulness when Paul curses (yes, curses) anyone who attempts to judge another person. Such rank hypocrisy turns a blind eye not only to this passage, but to the entire message of justification by faith alone which Paul argues throughout the letter and which he introduces so powerfully in this first chapter. Then I could pursue some version of the “live and let live” argument, without directly confronting the misunderstanding that feeds this hypocrisy.

The problem is that while all of this is true – it leaves unquestioned a false assumption about the meaning of the text. Look again at the first words of verse 26 above. To what does the phrase “Because of this...” refer? You’ll find the answer in verses 23 and 25: “they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal human beings and birds and animals and reptiles” (verse 23); and “they worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator” (verse 25).

Because of idolatry.

What was going on when these women “exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones” (note here that Paul does not necessarily have what we would call lesbians in mind, but could refer to woman who take a dominant – unnatural – role in the sex act) and these men who “abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another... commit[ing] shameful acts with other men”? As in Leviticus, context is the key to understanding the passage, the key to avoiding our reading into the text any meaning which cannot make sense given that context. Scholars label the practice of lifting sound bites of scripture out of context to support dubious arguments “proof-texting”, a practice that divorces a passage or phrase from its context.

“Because of this” links the meaning of whatever follows with the passage that precedes it. “This” has an antecedent; and the antecedent is idolatry.

Romans 1 cannot be a blanket condemnation of all homosexual expressions of love and affection, because the passage focuses on another practice entirely, just as in Leviticus and the scrolls of the Kings: idolatrous religious prostitution between male “worshippers” and female and male temple prostitutes.

Paul’s understanding of this ancient form of pagan worship that persisted in his own time and perhaps among some early followers of the Way of Jesus the Christ was that this behavior (men having sex with male and female temple prostitutes, as well as women and men who served as temple prostitutes) had less to do with sexual desire, but was itself a sign of an earlier decision the male made to worship images and idols they could see instead of the God who created all things, whom they could not see. Once they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, a host of unnatural perversions of behavior followed, according to Paul.

Now we come full-circle, having begun our survey in Leviticus 18 and 20. In Romans, as in Leviticus, the scripture employs not a noun or a verb but a phrase describing an action:

Leviticus 18:22: “sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman”

Romans 1:27: “men abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another”

Both passages mention this action in the context of pagan religious idol worship. In Leviticus, the verse which precedes 18:22 prohibits giving any of one’s children to be sacrificed to the pagan god, Molek (an act which is not condemned as murder, but which profanes the name of God). In Romans, the verse follows two descriptions of worshiping and serving created things, images made to look like mortal human beings and birds and animals and reptiles. And though neither passage mentions temple prostitution explicitly, other Hebrew Bible passages mentioned above testify to the persistence of this practice, even in the Temple at Jerusalem, and the actions described in Romans 1:26-27 sound like a graphic description of sex between men and male and female pagan religious prostitutes.

What to Conclude from this Biblical Tour?

At the outset of this review of scripture passages in the Bible, I began by stating that **scripture has nothing to say about homosexuality as a sexual orientation**. These twelve scriptural references (see Appendix 1) to sex between men (including one reference some people assume refers to sex between women) establish a Biblical condemnation of homosexual prostitution (societal or religious), gang rape, and pederasty (homosexual sex between an adult and child). That they establish a Biblical condemnation of people who are gay and lesbian is a matter of interpretation.

Half of these references refer to cult prostitution in the temple, and another refers to same-sex gang rape. The two verses in the Leviticus Holiness Code prohibit men having sex with men, but do not mention the *state of being* a homosexual or lesbian person. The sex act to which Leviticus refers may also be the cult prostitution or rape mentioned in all of the other Old Testament references. The Romans passage is itself about the consequences of idol worship; Paul’s mention of homosexual encounters in verses 26 and 27 may refer to the kind of prostitution practiced in pagan temples.

These verses have come to justify Christian condemnation of homosexual persons in the same way the word “sodomy” came to mean anal intercourse and not inhospitality (as Jesus defines it in Matthew 10:14-15) or pride and selfishness (as Ezekiel 16:49 defines it). How did that happen? How have we made the leap from a specific condemnation of temple prostitution to a blanket condemnation of any expression of love or affection between homosexual persons? We did it by defining what we would find before we even opened the scriptures. Non-religious cultural taboos against homosexuality create in heterosexual people a fear that drives all inquiry.

Repeatedly, the worship of idols has come up throughout this scripture study. Idols reflect only and always the desires of those who choose to worship them. Idols do not challenge; they mollify. Idols are merely projections of ourselves – the ultimate form of hubris and self-delusion. And idols have no power. Our God is no idol.

I have offered these interpretations of scriptures that have become idols to those of us who seek in them merely confirmation of our own fears of those whose sexual orientation differs from the dominant expression. When you look again, you might see an invitation to worship a God who calls us beyond spiritual pride to a place of grace and hospitality. In opening our hearts to this transformation, we might find our own way home.

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Appendix 1: The Scripture Passages Considered in this Paper

¹The two angels arrived at Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of the city. When he saw them, he got up to meet them and bowed down with his face to the ground. ² "My lords," he said, "please turn aside to your servant's house. You can wash your feet and spend the night and then go on your way early in the morning." "No," they answered, "we will spend the night in the square." ³ But he insisted so strongly that they did go with him and entered his house. He prepared a meal for them, baking bread without yeast, and they ate. ⁴ Before they had gone to bed, all the men from every part of the city of Sodom--both young and old--surrounded the house. ⁵ They called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them." ⁶ Lot went outside to meet them and shut the door behind him ⁷ and said, "No, my friends. Don't do this wicked thing. ⁸ Look, I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them. But don't do anything to these men, for they have come under the protection of my roof." ⁹ "Get out of our way," they replied. "This fellow came here as a foreigner, and now he wants to play the judge! We'll treat you worse than them." They kept bringing pressure on Lot and moved forward to break down the door. ¹⁰ But the men inside reached out and pulled Lot back into the house and shut the door. ¹¹ Then they struck the men who were at the door of the house, young and old, with blindness so that they could not find the door. **(Genesis 19:1-11 TNIV)**

²² "Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable. **(Leviticus 18:22 TNIV)**

¹³ "If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They are to be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads. **(Leviticus 20:13 TNIV)**

¹⁷ No Israelite man or woman is to become a shrine prostitute. ¹⁸ You must not bring the earnings of a female prostitute or of a male prostitute into the house of the LORD your God to pay any vow, because the LORD your God detests them both. **(Deuteronomy 23:17-18 TNIV)**

²⁴ There were even male shrine prostitutes in the land; the people engaged in all the detestable practices of the nations the LORD had driven out before the Israelites. **(1Kings 14:24 TNIV)**

¹¹ Asa did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, as his father David had done. ¹² He expelled the male shrine prostitutes from the land and got rid of all the idols his ancestors had made. **(1Kings 15:11-12 TNIV)**

⁴⁴ Jehoshaphat was also at peace with the king of Israel. ⁴⁵ As for the other events of Jehoshaphat's reign, the things he achieved and his military exploits, are they not written in the book of the annals of the kings of Judah? ⁴⁶ He rid the land of the rest of the male shrine prostitutes who remained there even after the reign of his father Asa. **(1Kings 22:44-46 TNIV)**

⁷ [Josiah] also tore down the quarters of the male shrine prostitutes that were in the temple of the LORD, the quarters where women did weaving for Asherah. **(2Kings 23:7 TNIV)**

¹³ "The godless in heart harbor resentment; even when he fetters them, they do not cry for help. ¹⁴ They die in their youth, among male prostitutes of the shrines. **(Job 36:13-14 TNIV)**

²⁰ For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. ²¹ For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal human beings and birds and animals and reptiles. ²⁴ Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. ²⁵ They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator--who is forever praised. Amen. ²⁶ Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. ²⁷ In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error. ²⁸ Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. ²⁹ They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; ³¹ they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. **(Romans 1:20-31 TNIV)**

⁹ Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor practicing homosexuals ¹⁰ nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. **(1Corinthians 6:9-10 TNIV)**

⁹ We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, ¹⁰ for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality, for slave traders and liars and perjurers. **(1Timothy 1:9-10a TNIV)**

Appendix 2: Parallels between Genesis 19 and Judges 19

1. Visitors arrive at the town in the evening

- a. Now the two angels came to Sodom in the evening (Genesis 19.1)
- b. So they passed along and went their way, and the sun set on them near Gibeah (Judges 19.14)

2. They intend to spend the night in the square

- a. They said however, "No, but we shall spend the night in the square." (Genesis 19.2)
- b. When they entered, they sat down in the open square of the city, for no one took them into his house to spend the night. (Judges 19.15)

3. The man who provides the travelers hospitality is himself an alien (not originally from the town)

- a. Furthermore, they said, "This one came in as an alien, and already he is acting like a judge (Genesis 19.9)
- b. Now the man was from the hill country of Ephraim, and he was staying in Gibeah, but the men of the place were Benjamites. (Judges 19.16)

4. They share a feast in the man's home

- a. so they turned aside to him and entered his house; and he prepared a feast for them, and baked unleavened bread, and they ate. (Genesis 19.3)
- b. So he took him into his house and gave the donkeys fodder, and they washed their feet and ate and drank. While they were celebrating, (Judges 19.21-22a)

5. The men of the city surround the house and speak to the host

- a. the men of the city, the men of Sodom, surrounded the house, both young and old, all the people from every quarter; and they called to Lot (Genesis 19.4-5a)
- b. the men of the city, certain worthless fellows, surrounded the house, pounding the door; and they spoke to the owner of the house, the old man (Judges 19.22)

6. They demand that the host surrender his male guest(s) so that they may sexually abuse the guest

- a. "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us that we may have relations with them." (Genesis 19.5)
- b. "Bring out the man who came into your house that we may have relations with him." (Judges 19.22)

7. The host pleads with the men of the city not to violate his guest (who is under his protection) and offers them the women in the house to sexually abuse instead

- a. "Please, my brothers, do not act wickedly. Now behold, I have two daughters who have not had relations with man; please let me bring them out to you, and do to them whatever you like; only do nothing to these men, inasmuch as they have come under the shelter of my roof." (Genesis 19.7-8)
- b. "No, my fellows, please do not act so wickedly; since this man has come into my house, do not commit this act of folly. 24 "Here is my virgin daughter and his concubine. Please let me bring them out that you may ravish them and do to them whatever you wish. But do not commit such an act of folly against this man." (Judges 19.23-24)

8. The men of the city refuse the offer – but do not harm the (male) visitor(s)

- a. So they pressed hard against Lot and came near to break the door. (Genesis 19.9)
- b. But the men would not listen to him. (Judges 19.25)

9. The behavior of the men of the city results in the total destruction of the people and the city (by fire)

- a. ...for we are about to destroy this place, because their outcry has become so great before the LORD that the LORD has sent us to destroy it. ...Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the LORD out of heaven, and He overthrew those cities, and all the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. (Genesis 19:13, 24-25)
- b. So the sons of Benjamin saw that they were defeated. When the men of Israel gave ground to Benjamin because they relied on the men in ambush whom they had set against Gibeah, the men in ambush hurried and rushed against Gibeah; the men in ambush also deployed and struck all the city with the edge of the sword. Now the appointed sign between the men of Israel and the men in ambush was that they would make a great cloud of smoke rise from the city. But when the cloud began to rise from the city in a column of smoke, Benjamin looked behind them; and behold, the whole city was going up in smoke to heaven... The men of Israel then turned back against the sons of Benjamin and struck them with the edge of the sword, both the entire city with the cattle and all that they found; they also set on fire all the cities which they found. (Judges 20.36-38, 40 and 48)

Appendix 3: References to “Sodom” in the Bible (beyond the book of Genesis)

1. Deuteronomy 29:23 'All its land is brimstone and salt, a burning waste, unsown and unproductive, and no grass grows in it, like the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim, which the LORD overthrew in His anger and in His wrath.'
2. Deuteronomy 32:32 "For their vine is from the vine of Sodom, And from the fields of Gomorrah; Their grapes are grapes of poison, Their clusters, bitter.
3. Isaiah 1:9-10 Unless the LORD of hosts Had left us a few survivors, We would be like Sodom, We would be like Gomorrah. Hear the word of the LORD, You rulers of Sodom; Give ear to the instruction of our God, You people of Gomorrah.
4. Isaiah 3:9 The expression of their faces bears witness against them. And they display their sin like Sodom; They do not even conceal it. Woe to them! For they have brought evil on themselves.
5. Isaiah 13:19 And Babylon, the beauty of kingdoms, the glory of the Chaldeans' pride, Will be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah.
6. Jeremiah 23:14 "Also among the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen a horrible thing: The committing of adultery and walking in falsehood; And they strengthen the hands of evildoers, So that no one has turned back from his wickedness. All of them have become to Me like Sodom, And her inhabitants like Gomorrah.
7. Jeremiah 49:18 "Like the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah with its neighbors," says the LORD, "no one will live there, nor will a son of man reside in it.
8. Jeremiah 50:40 "As when God overthrew Sodom And Gomorrah with its neighbors," declares the LORD, "No man will live there, Nor will any son of man reside in it.
9. Lamentations 4:6 For the iniquity of the daughter of my people Is greater than the sin of Sodom, Which was overthrown as in a moment, And no hands were turned toward her.
10. Ezekiel 16:46-58 46 "Now your older sister is Samaria, who lives north of you with her daughters; and your younger sister, who lives south of you, is Sodom with her daughters. 47 "Yet you have not merely walked in their ways or done according to their abominations; but, as if that were too little, you acted more corruptly in all your conduct than they. 48 "As I live," declares the Lord God, "Sodom, your sister, and her daughters, have not done as you and your daughters have done. 49 "Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had arrogance, abundant food, and careless ease, but she did not help the poor and needy. 50 "Thus they were haughty and committed abominations before Me. Therefore I removed them when I saw it. 51 "Furthermore, Samaria did not commit half of your sins, for you have multiplied your abominations more than they. Thus you have made your sisters appear righteous by all your abominations which you have committed. 52 "Also bear your disgrace in that you have made judgment favorable for your sisters. Because of your sins in which you acted more abominably than they, they are more in the right than you. Yes, be also ashamed and bear your disgrace, in that you made your sisters appear righteous. 53 "Nevertheless, I will restore their captivity, the captivity of Sodom and her daughters, the captivity of Samaria and her daughters, and along with them your own captivity, 54 in order that you may bear your humiliation, and feel ashamed for all that you have done when you become a consolation to them. 55 "And your sisters, Sodom with her daughters and Samaria with her daughters, will return to their former state, and you with your daughters will also return to your former state. 56 "As the name of your sister Sodom was not heard from your lips in your day of pride, 57 before your wickedness was uncovered, so now you have become the reproach of the daughters of Edom, and of all who are around her, of the daughters of the Philistines-- those surrounding you who despise you. 58 "You have borne the penalty of your lewdness and abominations," the LORD declares.
11. Amos 4:11 "I overthrew you as God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, And you were like a firebrand snatched from a blaze; Yet you have not returned to Me," declares the LORD.
12. Zephaniah 2:9 "Therefore, as I live," declares the LORD of hosts, The God of Israel, "Surely Moab will be like Sodom, And the sons of Ammon like Gomorrah-- A place possessed by nettles and salt pits, And a perpetual desolation. The remnant of My people will plunder them, And the remainder of My nation will inherit them."
13. Matthew 10:11-16 "11 "And into whatever city or village you enter, inquire who is worthy in it; and abide there until you go away. 12 "And as you enter the house, give it your greeting. 13 "And if the house is worthy, let your greeting of peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your greeting of peace return to you. 14 "And whoever does not receive you, nor heed your words, as you go out of that house or that city, shake off the dust of your feet. 15 "Truly I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment, than for that city. 16 "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; therefore be shrewd as serpents, and innocent as doves.
14. Matthew 11:20, 23-24 "Then He began to reproach the cities in which most of His miracles were done, because they did not repent... And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You shall descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day. Nevertheless I say to you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for you.
15. Luke 10:3-12 3 "Go your ways; behold, I send you out as lambs in the midst of wolves. 4 "Carry no purse, no bag, no shoes; and greet no one on the way. 5 "And whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace be to this house. 6 "And if a man of peace is there, your peace will rest upon him; but if not, it will return to you. 7 "And stay in that house, eating and drinking what they give you; for the laborer is worthy of his wages. Do not keep moving from house to house. 8 "And whatever city you enter, and they receive you, eat what is set before you; 9 and heal those in it who are sick, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' 10 "But whatever city you enter and they do not receive you, go out into its streets and say, 11 'Even the dust of your city which clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you; yet be sure of this, that the kingdom of God has come near.' 12 "I say to you, it will be more tolerable in that day for Sodom, than for that city.

16. Luke 17:28-29 "It was the same as happened in the days of Lot: they were eating, they were drinking, they were buying, they were selling, they were planting, they were building; but on the day that Lot went out from Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all.
17. Romans 9:29 And just as Isaiah foretold, "Except the Lord of Sabaoth had left to us a posterity, We would have become as Sodom, and would have resembled Gomorrah."
18. 2 Peter 2:4-11 4 For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment; 5 and did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a preacher of righteousness, with seven others, when He brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly; 6 and if He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to destruction by reducing them to ashes, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly thereafter; 7 and if He rescued righteous Lot, oppressed by the sensual conduct of unprincipled men 8 (for by what he saw and heard that righteous man, while living among them, felt his righteous soul tormented day after day with their lawless deeds), 9 then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment, 10 and especially those who indulge the flesh in its corrupt desires and despise authority. Daring, self-willed, they do not tremble when they revile angelic majesties, 11 whereas angels who are greater in might and power do not bring a reviling judgment against them before the Lord.
19. Jude 1:5-9 Now I desire to remind you, though you know all things once for all, that the Lord, after saving a people out of the land of Egypt, subsequently destroyed those who did not believe. 6 And angels who did not keep their own domain, but abandoned their proper abode, He has kept in eternal bonds under darkness for the judgment of the great day. 7 Just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them, since they in the same way as these indulged in gross immorality and went after strange flesh, are exhibited as an example, in undergoing the punishment of eternal fire. 8 Yet in the same manner these men, also by dreaming, defile the flesh, and reject authority, and revile angelic majesties. 9 But Michael the archangel, when he disputed with the devil and argued about the body of Moses, did not dare pronounce against him a railing judgment, but said, "The Lord rebuke you."
20. Revelation 11:8 And their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city which mystically is called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified.

Appendix 4: The Verses in the Hebrew Scriptures that use the word Toyevah (translated: abomination or detestable)

- Genesis 43:32 They served him by himself, the brothers by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves, because Egyptians could not eat with Hebrews, for that is detestable to Egyptians.
- Genesis 46:34 you should answer, 'Your servants have tended livestock from our boyhood on, just as our fathers did.' Then you will be allowed to settle in the region of Goshen, for all shepherds are detestable to the Egyptians."
- Exodus 8:26 But Moses said, "That would not be right. The sacrifices we offer the LORD our God would be detestable to the Egyptians. And if we offer sacrifices that are detestable in their eyes, will they not stone us?"
- Leviticus 18:22 "Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable.
- Leviticus 18:26 But you must keep my decrees and my laws. The native-born and the foreigners residing among you must not do any of these detestable things,
- Leviticus 18:27 for all these things were done by the people who lived in the land before you, and the land became defiled.
- Leviticus 18:29 "Everyone who does any of these detestable things--such persons must be cut off from their people.
- Leviticus 18:30 Keep my requirements and do not follow any of the detestable customs that were practiced before you came and do not defile yourselves with them. I am the LORD your God.' "
- Leviticus 20:13 "If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They are to be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads.
- Deuteronomy 7:25 The images of their gods you are to burn in the fire. Do not covet the silver and gold on them, and do not take it for yourselves, or you will be ensnared by it, for it is detestable to the LORD your God.
- Deuteronomy 7:26 Do not bring a detestable thing into your house or you, like it, will be set apart for destruction. Regard it as vile and utterly detest it, for it is set apart for destruction.
- Deuteronomy 12:31 You must not worship the LORD your God in their way, because in worshiping their gods, they do all kinds of detestable things the LORD hates. They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods.
- Deuteronomy 13:12-14 12 If you hear it said about one of the towns the LORD your God is giving you to live in 13 that wicked persons have arisen among you and have led the people of their town astray, saying, "Let us go and worship other gods" (gods you have not known), 14 then you must inquire, probe and investigate it thoroughly. And if it is true and it has been proved that this detestable thing has been done among you,
- Deuteronomy 14:3 Do not eat any detestable thing.
- Deuteronomy 17:1 Do not sacrifice to the LORD your God an ox or a sheep that has any defect or flaw in it, for that would be detestable to him.
- Deuteronomy 17:2-4 2 If a man or woman living among you in one of the towns the LORD gives you is found doing evil in the eyes of the LORD your God in violation of his covenant, 3 and contrary to my command has worshiped other gods, bowing down to them or to the sun or the moon or the stars in the sky, 4 and this has been brought to your attention, then you must investigate it thoroughly. If it is true and it has been proved that this detestable thing has been done in Israel,
- Deuteronomy 18:9 When you enter the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there.
- Deuteronomy 18:10-12 10 Let no one be found among you who sacrifices their son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, 11 or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. 12 Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD, and because of these detestable practices the LORD your God will drive out those nations before you.
- Deuteronomy 20:18 Otherwise, they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshiping their gods, and you will sin against the LORD your God.
- Deuteronomy 22:5 A woman must not wear men's clothing, nor a man wear women's clothing, for the LORD your God detests anyone who does this.
- Deuteronomy 23:18 You must not bring the earnings of a female prostitute or of a male prostitute into the house of the LORD your God to pay any vow, because the LORD your God detests them both.
- Deuteronomy 24:4 then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the LORD. Do not bring sin upon the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.
- Deuteronomy 25:14-16 14 Do not have two differing measures in your house--one large, one small. 15 You must have accurate and honest weights and measures, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you. 16 For the LORD your God detests anyone who does these things, anyone who deals dishonestly.
- Deuteronomy 27:15 "Cursed is anyone who makes an idol--a thing detestable to the LORD, the work of skilled hands--and sets it up in secret." Then all the people shall say, "Amen!"
- Deuteronomy 32:16 They made him jealous with their foreign gods and angered him with their detestable idols.
- 1 Kings 14:24 There were even male shrine prostitutes in the land; the people engaged in all the detestable practices of the nations the LORD had driven out before the Israelites.
- 2 Kings 16:3 He followed the ways of the kings of Israel and even sacrificed his son in the fire, engaging in the detestable practices of the nations the LORD had driven out before the Israelites.
- 2 Kings 21:2 He did evil in the eyes of the LORD, following the detestable practices of the nations the LORD had driven out before the Israelites.
- 2 Kings 21:11 "Manasseh king of Judah has committed these detestable sins. He has done more evil than the Amorites who preceded him and has led Judah into sin with his idols.
- 2 Kings 23:13 The king also desecrated the high places that were east of Jerusalem on the south of the Hill of Corruption--the ones Solomon king of Israel had built for Ashtoreth the vile goddess of the Sidonians, for Chemosh the vile god of Moab, and for Molek the detestable god of the people of Ammon.
- 2 Chronicles 28:3 He burned sacrifices in the Valley of Ben Hinnom and sacrificed his children in the fire, engaging in the detestable practices of the nations the LORD had driven out before the Israelites.
- 2 Chronicles 33:2 He did evil in the eyes of the LORD, following the detestable practices of the nations the LORD had driven out before the Israelites.
- 2 Chronicles 34:33 Josiah removed all the detestable idols from all the territory belonging to the Israelites, and he had all who were present in Israel serve the LORD their God. As long as he lived, they did not fail to follow the LORD, the God of their ancestors.

2 Chronicles 36:8 The other events of Jehoiakim's reign, the detestable things he did and all that was found against him, are written in the book of the kings of Israel and Judah. And Jehoiachin his son succeeded him as king.

2 Chronicles 36:14 Furthermore, all the leaders of the priests and the people became more and more unfaithful, following all the detestable practices of the nations and defiling the temple of the LORD, which he had consecrated in Jerusalem.

Ezra 9:1 After these things had been done, the leaders came to me and said, "The people of Israel, including the priests and the Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the neighboring peoples with their detestable practices, like those of the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites.

Ezra 9:11 you gave through your servants the prophets when you said: "The land you are entering to possess is a land polluted by the corruption of its peoples. By their detestable practices they have filled it with their impurity from one end to the other.

Ezra 9:14 Shall we then break your commands again and intermarry with the peoples who commit such detestable practices? Would you not be angry enough with us to destroy us, leaving us no remnant or survivor?

Psalm 88:8 You have taken from me my closest friends and have made me repulsive to them. I am confined and cannot escape;

Proverbs 3:32 For the LORD detests the perverse but takes the upright into his confidence.

Proverbs 6:16-18 There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him: 17 haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, 18 a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, 19 a false witness who pours out lies and a person who stirs up dissension in the community.

Proverbs 8:7 My mouth speaks what is true, for my lips detest wickedness.

Proverbs 11:1 The LORD detests dishonest scales, but accurate weights find favor with him.

Proverbs 11:20 The LORD detests those whose hearts are perverse, but he delights in those whose ways are blameless.

Proverbs 12:22 The LORD detests lying lips, but he delights in people who are trustworthy.

Proverbs 13:19 A longing fulfilled is sweet to the soul, but fools detest turning from evil.

Proverbs 15:8 The LORD detests the sacrifice of the wicked, but the prayer of the upright pleases him.

Proverbs 15:9 The LORD detests the way of the wicked, but he loves those who pursue righteousness.

Proverbs 15:26 The LORD detests the thoughts of the wicked, but gracious words are pure in his sight.

Proverbs 16:5 The LORD detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished.

Proverbs 16:12 Kings detest wrongdoing, for a throne is established through righteousness.

Proverbs 17:15 Acquitting the guilty and condemning the innocent-- the LORD detests them both.

Proverbs 20:10 Differing weights and differing measures-- the LORD detests them both.

Proverbs 20:23 The LORD detests differing weights, and dishonest scales do not please him.

Proverbs 21:27 The sacrifice of the wicked is detestable-- how much more so when brought with evil intent!

Proverbs 24:9 The schemes of folly are sin, and people detest a mocker.

Proverbs 26:25 Though their speech is charming, do not believe them, for seven abominations fill their hearts.

Proverbs 28:9 If anyone turns a deaf ear to my instruction, even their prayers are detestable.

Proverbs 29:27 The righteous detest the dishonest; the wicked detest the upright.

Isaiah 1:13 Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations-- I cannot bear your evil assemblies.

Isaiah 41:24 But you are less than nothing and you can do nothing; those who choose you are detestable.

Isaiah 44:19 No one stops to think, no one has the knowledge or understanding to say, "Half of it I used for fuel; I even baked bread over its coals, I roasted meat and I ate. Shall I make a detestable thing from what is left? Shall I bow down to a block of wood?"

Jeremiah 2:7 I brought you into a fertile land to eat its fruit and rich produce. But you came and defiled my land and made my inheritance detestable.

Jeremiah 6:15 Are they ashamed of their detestable conduct? No, they have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush. So they will fall among the fallen; they will be brought down when I punish them," says the LORD.

Jeremiah 7:10 and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, "We are safe"--safe to do all these detestable things?

Jeremiah 8:12 Are they ashamed of their detestable conduct? No, they have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush. So they will fall among the fallen; they will be brought down when they are punished, says the LORD.

Jeremiah 16:18 I will repay them double for their wickedness and their sin, because they have defiled my land with the lifeless forms of their vile images and have filled my inheritance with their detestable idols."

Jeremiah 32:35 They built high places for Baal in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to sacrifice their sons and daughters to Molek, though I never commanded--nor did it enter my mind--that they should do such a detestable thing and so make Judah sin.

Jeremiah 44:4 Again and again I sent my servants the prophets, who said, "Do not do this detestable thing that I hate!"

Jeremiah 44:22 When the LORD could no longer endure your wicked actions and the detestable things you did, your land became a curse and a desolate waste without inhabitants, as it is today.

Ezekiel 5:9 Because of all your detestable idols, I will do to you what I have never done before and will never do again.

Ezekiel 5:11 Therefore as surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, because you have defiled my sanctuary with all your vile images and detestable practices, I myself will shave you; I will not look on you with pity or spare you.

Ezekiel 6:9 Then in the nations where they have been carried captive, those who escape will remember me--how I have been grieved by their adulterous hearts, which have turned away from me, and by their eyes, which have lusted after their idols. They will loathe themselves for the evil they have done and for all their detestable practices.

Ezekiel 6:11 " "This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Strike your hands together and stamp your feet and cry out "Alas!" because of all the wicked and detestable practices of the house of Israel, for they will fall by the sword, famine and plague.

Ezekiel 7:3 The end is now upon you, and I will unleash my anger against you. I will judge you according to your conduct and repay you for all your detestable practices.

Ezekiel 7:4 I will not look on you with pity; I will not spare you. I will surely repay you for your conduct and for the detestable practices among you. " "Then you will know that I am the LORD."

Ezekiel 7:8 I am about to pour out my wrath on you and spend my anger against you. I will judge you according to your conduct and repay you for all your detestable practices.

Ezekiel 7:9 I will not look on you with pity; I will not spare you. I will repay you for your conduct and for the detestable practices among you. " "Then you will know that it is I the LORD who strikes you.

Ezekiel 7:20 They took pride in their beautiful jewelry and used it to make their detestable idols. They made it into vile images; therefore I will make it a thing unclean for them.

Ezekiel 8:6 And he said to me, "Son of man, do you see what they are doing--the utterly detestable things the house of Israel is doing here, things that will drive me far from my sanctuary? But you will see things that are even more detestable."

Ezekiel 8:9 And he said to me, "Go in and see the wicked and detestable things they are doing here."

Ezekiel 8:13 Again, he said, "You will see them doing things that are even more detestable."

Ezekiel 8:15 He said to me, "Do you see this, son of man? You will see things that are even more detestable than this."

Ezekiel 8:17 He said to me, "Have you seen this, son of man? Is it a trivial matter for the house of Judah to do the detestable things they are doing here? Must they also fill the land with violence and continually arouse my anger? Look at them putting the branch to their nose!

Ezekiel 9:4 and said to him, "Go throughout the city of Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are done in it."

Ezekiel 11:18 "They will return to it and remove all its vile images and detestable idols.

Ezekiel 11:21 But as for those whose hearts are devoted to their vile images and detestable idols, I will bring down on their own heads what they have done, declares the Sovereign LORD."

Ezekiel 12:16 But I will spare a few of them from the sword, famine and plague, so that in the nations where they go they may acknowledge all their detestable practices. Then they will know that I am the LORD."

Ezekiel 14:6 "Therefore say to the house of Israel, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Repent! Turn from your idols and renounce all your detestable practices!

Ezekiel 16:2 "Son of man, confront Jerusalem with her detestable practices

Ezekiel 16:22 In all your detestable practices and your prostitution you did not remember the days of your youth, when you were naked and bare, kicking about in your blood.

Ezekiel 16:36 This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Because you poured out your lust and exposed your nakedness in your promiscuity with your lovers, and because of all your detestable idols, and because you gave them your children's blood,

Ezekiel 16:43 " 'Because you did not remember the days of your youth but enraged me with all these things, I will surely bring down on your head what you have done, declares the Sovereign LORD. Did you not add lewdness to all your other detestable practices?

Ezekiel 16:47 You not only followed their ways and copied their detestable practices, but in all your ways you soon became more depraved than they.

Ezekiel 16:50 They were haughty and did detestable things before me. Therefore I did away with them as you have seen.

Ezekiel 16:51 Samaria did not commit half the sins you did. You have done more detestable things than they, and have made your sisters seem righteous by all these things you have done.

Ezekiel 16:58 You will bear the consequences of your lewdness and your detestable practices, declares the LORD.

Ezekiel 18:12 He oppresses the poor and needy. He commits robbery. He does not return what he took in pledge. He looks to the idols. He does detestable things.

Ezekiel 18:13 He lends at interest and takes a profit. Will such a man live? He will not! Because he has done all these detestable things, he is to be put to death; his blood will be on his own head.

Ezekiel 18:24 "But if the righteous turn from their righteousness and commit sin and do the same detestable things the wicked do, will they live? None of the righteous things they have done will be remembered. Because of the unfaithfulness they are guilty of and because of the sins they have committed, they will die.

Ezekiel 20:4 "Will you judge them? Will you judge them, son of man? Then confront them with the detestable practices of their ancestors

Ezekiel 22:2 "Son of man, will you judge her? Will you judge this city of bloodshed? Then confront her with all her detestable practices

Ezekiel 22:11 In you one man commits a detestable offense with his neighbor's wife, another shamefully defiles his daughter-in-law, and another violates his sister, his own father's daughter.

Ezekiel 23:36 The LORD said to me: "Son of man, will you judge Oholah and Oholibah? Then confront them with their detestable practices,

Ezekiel 33:26 You rely on your sword, you do detestable things, and each of you defiles his neighbor's wife. Should you then possess the land?"

Ezekiel 33:29 Then they will know that I am the LORD, when I have made the land a desolate waste because of all the detestable things they have done.'

Ezekiel 36:31 Then you will remember your evil ways and wicked deeds, and you will loathe yourselves for your sins and detestable practices.

Ezekiel 43:8 When they placed their threshold next to my threshold and their doorposts beside my doorposts, with only a wall between me and them, they defiled my holy name by their detestable practices. So I destroyed them in my anger.

Ezekiel 44:6 Say to the rebellious house of Israel, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Enough of your detestable practices, house of Israel!

Ezekiel 44:7 In addition to all your other detestable practices, you brought foreigners uncircumcised in heart and flesh into my sanctuary, desecrating my temple while you offered me food, fat and blood, and you broke my covenant.

Ezekiel 44:13 They are not to come near to serve me as priests or come near any of my holy things or my most holy offerings; they must bear the shame of their detestable practices.

Malachi 2:11 Judah has been unfaithful. A detestable thing has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem: Judah has desecrated the sanctuary the LORD loves by marrying women who worship a foreign god.